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ABSTRACT

Informal learning by Canadian seniors was examined through semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected group of 51 older Canadians (28 women and 23) who ranged in age from 58 to 95 years (average age, 73.7). All were retired or semi-retired, and all had engaged in several learning projects over the previous year in topics such as the following: self-knowledge, health, relationships, current affairs, social justice, history, spirituality, the arts, philosophy, computers, homemaking, and genealogy. Equal numbers of interviewees preferred learning alone and learning in groups. A few preferred one-on-one coaching or dialogue. When asked about their methods of learning, the interviewees mentioned learning by doing (32 times), by reading (33 times), through discussion (35 times), by watching (26 times), and by listening (27 times). The resources they used depended on topic and circumstances, with print media, people, and computers being mentioned by 44, 32, and 14 interviewees, respectively. Thirty-five adults stated that learning had always been important to them. Most participants were enthusiastic about the contributions that learning made to their lives, with 20 describing it as vital to their survival. Thirty-one interviewees stated that they spent more time on learning now than in their younger years, and 11 said they spent less time learning now than previously. (Contains 14 references.) (MN)

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Informal Learning of Seniors in Canadian Society

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Abstract

This paper contributes to an increasing body of knowledge about the later stages of lifelong learning. Arising from the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning survey (Livingstone, 1999) of informal learning in Canada, a post-retirement study of seniors revealed that many continue to be avid learners into extreme old age. Learning for these elders is so interconnected with daily activities and relationships that they deem it as natural and necessary as breathing. No longer having to learn for work-related reasons, they engage in it for the sheer joy of learning. They are self-directed, exploring whatever they want, with most of their learning happening informally. The major implications have to do with program planning for older adults. As unprecedented numbers of people enter retirement in the near future, educational organizations, retirement residences, and community groups must consider resource allocations, program development, and interfacing of elderlearning with the broader community for mutual benefit across the generations.

A 1998 survey on learning among the Canadian adult population laid the groundwork for investigations by a research network called New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. It sought to identify the extent of learning and barriers to learning among Canadian adults, especially informal learning that occurs outside educational institutions. It built on previous studies of informal learning, notably ToughÕs self-directed learning projects (1971, 1978, 1979) and Penland (1976).

The NALL survey explored informal learning related to four general areas: employment, community, home, and general interest. The findings, summarized by David Livingstone (1999), confirmed what educators have long believed, that virtually everyone engages actively in learning activities. For early and middle years of adulthood much learning focuses on workplace topics. Less well documented is the learning that occurs for older people who are no longer motivated for work reasons. This period was the focus of a study on informal learning during later life stages.

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Study Background and Purpose

This study investigated informal learning experiences -- the contexts, kinds, processes, benefits, barriers -- among older Canadian adults. The research team wanted to discover what motivates people to learn once work is no longer a reason, how health affects learning, what obstacles diminish learning, what meanings are associated with learning, what resources people turn to. Later life learners are clearly motivated to learn for reasons beyond job training and career development. There may be patterns established during their career stage which contribute to their learning later in life.

Older adulthood from age 60 to death spans two generations as it encompasses an increasingly lengthening period of life. Issues relevant to peopleÕs learning in their eighties are often different from those of people in their sixties. Indeed Jarvis (2001) divides this post-vocational time into two periods: third age from 50-74 and fourth age from 75 on. This study listened to the stories of people from age 60 on, noting differences among younger and older participants.

Method

Subsequent to a pilot study which helped sharpen terms and refine questions, the research team developed an interview schedule. Interviewees were sought through third age learning groups, seniorsÕ community centres, seniorsÕ newsletters, retirement homes, and word-of-mouth contacts. They came from a large urban centre, one mid-size city, and two small towns, all in south-central Ontario.

This study was an experience survey, not a random survey. A selected sample of people was interviewed because of the likelihood that they would offer insights into informal learning later in life. Selltiz, Jahoda, Deutsch, and Cook state that Òin an experience survey it is a waste of time and effort to interview people who have...little relevant experience, or who lack ability to communicate their experienceÓ (1959, pp. 55-56). In experience surveys Òthe goal is to obtain ideas, good insights, and [experience]...One selects the sample -- a purposive sample -- with this in mindÓ (p. 538).

Fifty-one people (28 women and 23 men) ranging from 58 to 95 (average age 73.7) were interviewed, all retired or semi-retired. Participants came from varying ethnic backgrounds including English, Irish, Scottish, French, Jewish, German, Dutch, Italian, Philippino, Indian, Korean, and Japanese. Some had emigrated to Canada, othersÕ families had been in Canada for several generations. Thirty-nine lived in their own homes or apartments, 11 lived in retirement or nursing homes, and one lived with her family. Their formal educational background encompassed grade school, high school, university, and graduate school.

The womenÕs careers had included fulltime and parttime homemaking, office work, teaching, sales, consulting, law, music, art, computer programming, educational research, physiotherapy, nursing, and social work. The menÕs careers had included toolmaking, field engineering, teaching, advertising, civil service, business, university directorship, cooking, research, nutrition, music, social work, drafting, farming,

construction, armed forces, clergy, medicine, and management. Almost all had had several careers in their lifetime.

The interviews were semi-structured using both quantitative and open-ended questions exploring peopleÕs informal learning over the past year and discovering how it compared with learning earlier in their lives. Data were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches as appropriate.

Findings

All participants had engaged in several learning projects over the previous year. Topics ranged from self-knowledge, health, and relationships to current affairs, social justice, and history, from spirituality, arts, and philosophy to computers, homemaking, and geneology. An equal number preferred to learn alone as preferred to learn in groups, with several qualifying by saying it depended on the topic and circumstances. A small number preferred one-on-one coaching or dialogue. Learning by doing/participating was mentioned 32 times, by reading 33 times, through discussions 35 times, by watching 26 times, and through listening 27 times. Eight people declared they used all these modes for learning, depending on the topic and circumstances.

Resources used also depended on topic and circumstance. Most frequently reported were print (including books, journals, magazines, and newspapers) mentioned by 44 participants. People (family members, peers, teachers) were helpful resources for 32. Computers/internet were used by 14 people. Interestingly a few people who did not know how to use the computer themselves asked children, grandchildren, or friends to seek information on the web for them. Seventeen used TV or videos as resources while five mentioned the radio. Other resources included preparation for giving a talk (3), courses/lectures (3), journalling (1), travel (1), music (1), archives (1), music camp (1), house concerts (1), exams (1).

Ten said learning had not been important when they were younger; some had even hated school. An 81-year-old man who had grown up in Germany had been kicked out of school because he was a Jew. Now he stated that learning was very important to him: before retiring he took courses to develop hobbies, was currently editor of a seniorsÕ newspaper, and was taking courses designed for seniors.

Thirty-five stated that learning had always been important to them although the motivators were different. Learning in younger years had been associated with formal schooling and with keeping up in their job while learning presently was more internally motivated, providing greater pleasure and joy. Only five of the 51 said that learning was not as important to them now as it had been when they were younger.

Most participants were enthusiastic about the contributions which learning made to their own lives. Twenty described it as vital to their survival with words such as Òit keeps me aliveÓ and ÒI couldnÕt imagine life without learningÓ. Expressions such as ÒjoyÓ, ÒenrichmentÓ, ÒhappinessÓ, and Òlife itselfÓ were often used. The sense of accomplishment on acquiring new knowledge was described by a 66-year-old, ÒWhen

you learn something and remove errors, itÕs satisfying to have conquered something.Ó Others were pleased to keep up with the world. An 89-year-old man in a retirement residence said, ÒYouÕre confined here. But you can learn something every day. IÕve learned to study people, to know whom I want to be with and whom to avoid.Ó Keeping busy, increased confidence, and improved health were identified benefits. Rebuilding perspectives, providing a focus for each day, and protection from exploitation were also mentioned. A 65-year-old retired clergyman said that learning ties in with evaluating his life. ÒIÕm getting ready to die, not in a morbid way but itÕs exciting. As I look over my life, I ask whether it was worthwhile. IÕm not famous but I see what IÕve done. Now dying (just as living) has to be based on grace. I donÕt look on my life as a failure but thereÕs more I could achieve.Ó

As well as pay-offs for themselves, most were clear in naming benefits to families and friends. They shared their new information, modelled for younger generations, basked in their familyÕs pride of their accomplishments, and relieved their families of worry about them. An 84-year-old jokingly said that learning made it possible for younger generations to put up with him. ÒMy grandson is a debater; I have to have knowledge to score a point!Ó He wanted to know what the younger generation talked about. ÒAll my grandchildren have email. ItÕs a matter of personal prestige within the family to receive my emails.Ó A woman of 92 believed that she Òinspired her grandchildren and great grandchildren to keep learning; I learn from them too.Ó Confined to a wheelchair after a stroke, a 69-year-old said, ÒIÕm not a bore. I can talk about anything; I can be entertaining. I think my daughter and sons benefit.Ó A 65-year-old knew his family benefitted from his learning: ÒWe have intelligent conversations about what is going on around us; we have interests that are bigger than us. In conversations with my wife she makes me rethink what I am learning. With my son, I create emotional space for him to think things out and IÕm modelling for him.Ó

Several identified benefits of their learning beyond their immediate circle of family and friends. They felt more independent and respected by others and were better informed citizens participating in community organizations. A 77-year-old woman who had been an activist in her younger years was aware of benefits of her learning for her sons and friends but acknowledged ÒI have less influence today on the wider community than I used to have.Ó However she confided that she had been instrumental in successfully using her activist skills in petitioning city council for Sunday bus service Òso that seniors like me could go to church.Ó A 77-year-old immigrant said she had developed new teaching programs for younger generations of Koreans. A retired consultant of soil sciences at age 81 attended hearings about development; ÒIÕm an environmentalist. I go to speak up; I help them find ways of undertaking sustainable agriculture.Ó A 77-year-old talked about his involvement with church committees, a menÕs group, a hospice, a historical society, and canvasing for charitable organizations; in all of these his knowledge contributed. Only three mentioned that their learning had no impact on the wider community, believing only their families benefitted.

The question about how much time they spent on learning was problematic for almost every interviewee. They hesitated, most remarked about the difficulty of quantifying

something that was such an integral part of their daily lives, and many refused to name a figure. When asked how much time, a retired 84-year-old university administrator made a grimace and said, ÒNearly all my waking hours.Ó A 77-year-old said, ÒOh gosh, I donÕt know. ItÕs not like an assignment.Ó A 68-year-old said, ÒThatÕs a hard one. You learn all the time from things that happen in passing.Ó A 66-year-old said, ÒWow...wow...wow! ThatÕs a difficult question! ItÕs just part of your day.Ó Of the less than one-third who finally did produce a figure, 11 said more than 20 hours per week, three said more than 10 hours per week, and one said six hours per week.

Participants more easily answered the question about amount of time spent on learning now compared to younger adulthood. Thirty-one said they spent more time now on informal learning than in their younger adult years. Reasons were twofold: having more time now that they were no longer busy with jobs and child-rearing and being able to choose what they learned. A 74-year-old said she used to have to be Òhit over the head to learn.Ó A 69-year-old was Òmaking up for lost time now.Ó A 66-year-old Dutch immigrant said, ÒIn my reckless youth I just jumped in and did things. Now I place more emphasis on thinking about things.Ó Compared to 31 who spent more time on informal learning now, 11 said they spent less and 5 said they spent about the same amount of time. Two people did not know.

A question on differences in their learning endeavours from those in earlier adulthood further confirmed these two factors: the freedom to choose whatever piqued their interest and having the time. ÒThe desire and motivation are now mineÓ. Several also mentioned that they were more open to learning from daily happenings now. ÒA lot of learning I donÕt consciously go out to seek. It happens in daily conversations and activitiesÓ. A 63-year-old summed up the differences for him: ÒWhen I started my career I was driven by the gap of how little I knew; later I was driven to improve my competence; now the focus of my learning is legacyÓ. A retired social worker expressed the liberating lack of pressure as she felt Òfree to go wandering now.Ó One 73-year-old phrased it, ÒAs a university student I learned things to regurgitate; it was rote learning. Today I learn things for my own interest; I donÕt have to prove it to anyone.Ó Several described shifting learning styles as they moved from expert-driven learning to more self-directed approaches. A man of 77 talked about earlier learning being Òmore programmed with an objective and a deadline. Now I design my own course of studies and set my own time allocation; itÕs more relaxed.Ó One 65-year-old acknowledged that he had learned mostly from books and courses earlier while now he was more open to learning from other people. A 74-year-old said that she had been much more active and political in earlier learning while today it was mainly for personal growth. A few were quite surprised at topics which had had no appeal in younger years but which they now had a keen interest in.

Only a few mentioned differences which could be construed as negative. There were increasing limitations of their aging bodies and failing health. ÒI have to read things twice; my retention is lower nowÓ. ÒIÕm not so supple so it takes me longer to do things nowÓ. ÒI canÕt concentrate as well or remember as much but it doesnÕt matter as I enjoy it more nowÓ. ÒI will soon need more help as I am going blindÓ.

Surprisingly, however, only occasionally did these aging people mention their failing physical capabilities; those that did spoke in an accepting way of their aging processes. Even though some were in wheelchairs and had health problems, all except six rated their health as average or better.

As for similarities across the lifespan there were basic continuities in learning styles, motivation, and interests. They had always been open to wondering about things and their approach had been consistent. A man in his mid-80s described his lifelong Òthirst, curiosity, desire to understand other cultures.Ó A woman of 63 said she was still interested in the same kinds of things Òbut I choose to learn about them differently.Ó Many saw learning as essential across the lifespan for ongoing growth and development. ÒIf you stop learning you die,Ó stated a 74-year-old.

Discussion

Learning is complex with multiple factors. The distinctions we make as educators are ways of trying to understand the phenomenon more deeply and critically. The challenge in listening to these elders was to hear what their experience was saying without imposing our models and frameworks on their stories.

The importance of building relationship became increasingly evident as we met with these older adults. They wanted to share their stories; such stories are told in relationship. The interviews needed time. Sometimes the interviewer listened to peopleÕs news or looked at photographs of grandchildren before the interview could begin. In one case because the elderly man became unwell, the interview quickly came to an end. Interviews in homes and residence rooms meant that people were trustingly opening their personal space to a stranger. The stories covered a lifespan of memories. Some of these memories brought tears to their eyes and regrets for opportunities missed and pain endured.

The study confirmed what others (Jarvis, 2001; Knox, 1977; Labouvie-Vief, 1978; Lamdin & Fugate, 1997; MacKeracher, 1996) have stated: that people in later stages of life continue to learn well into extreme old age. The excitement of these elders for their learning adventures was contagious; they were turned on by their learning projects. The Lumdin and Fugate survey reported on motivation: ÒÕJoy of learningÕ is clearly the hands-down winner....If a survey result can be eloquent, this one is. ÔJoyÕ held its high ranking even when correlated with ageÓ (1997, p. 75). The awareness that they could learn even in challenging circumstances boosted their self-esteem. They eagerly told their stories and wanted others to benefit from their insights. In this they were unanimous: learning is lifelong.

The young-old generally had better health and mobility. They tended to have more options of where and how they could be involved in seeking learning experiences. They registered in third age seminars, travelled, attended plays and symphonies, volunteered in the community, and joined various groups. As people aged and had less mobility, they had fewer options for getting out to community events. Yet the attitude of keeping open to surprise in their living environment persisted. Some of the residents of a

retirement home wished for the mental stimulation of seminars and discussion groups unavailable in their residence. They resented having only light entertainment and games, craving more intellectual pursuits. The sad irony was that in this mid-size city there was an extremely active seniors learning program hosted by a university. Those in the seniorsÕ residence did not know of the university program nor did they have transportation for getting there.

There was much less formal classroom study happening than might have been expected. Jarvis states that for many people later in life Òthere are often fewer opportunities for formal learning, or even for being taught, but more opportunities for informal and non-formal learningÓ (2001, p. 22). Watkins and Marsick used two terms to describe experience-based learning taking place outside a formal classroom environment: informal and incidental.

> Informal learning is a broad term that includes any such learning; incidental learning is a subset that is defined as a by-product of some other activity. Informal learning can be planned or unplanned, but it usually involves some degree of conscious awareness that learning is taking place. Incidental learning, on the other hand, is largely unintentional, unexamined and embedded in peopleÕs closely held belief systems (1992, p. 288).

Informal learning includes both the intentionally chosen and directed and also incidental learning that flows from the unexpected. With these elders sometimes the learning was self-directed and deliberately sought while at other times they kept open to being surprised by the unexpected in their daily relationships and activities.

Elders were noticeably more self-directed than younger adults in their learning endeavours. A maturing process was reflected in an increasing trust in their own capacity to design and conduct their learning projects, relying less and less on external authorities. Even when attending seminars and courses, they wanted to discuss the lectures, react to what they heard, modify the ideas and make them their own. As one 63-year-old expressed, ÒI take ideas of other people but then I always build on them and change them. I need to make them my own.Ó Others delighted in the pleasures of informal learning situations where they were the primary instigators of the knowledge-building. Jarvis put this point into perspective when he reminded us that Òa great deal of our learning is incidental and unplanned at every age....seniorsÕ education forms but one part of a wider understanding of human life -- one in which we learn all the time, often incidentallyÓ (2001, p. 22).

The tension between academia and community showed in how we asked our questions and what we asked. Most notably this erupted in the question about amount of time spent on learning in an average week. Similar to the study of Lamdin and Fugate (1997), we found interviewees either reluctant or unable to answer the question. For many the question came as an intrusion in their reflections. Their reaction to it often conveyed impatience indicating its irrelevance and meaningless-ness in their eyes.

In our eagerness to crunch out a number, to what degree are we creating our own answers rather than being open to listening to what people are really saying? As

academics we often have a tendency to quantify knowledge, to make it a product. Yet these elders saw learning not as product but as process. To them learning was an integral part of their lives. It could not be quantified into time slots.

This recurring theme revealed that much learning for these people was so embedded in their daily activities and relationships that they often had difficulty separating the learning processes from the rest of their lives. It reminded us of the relationships of knowledge to the knower. These elderlearners viewed learning as essential for being alive and saw opportunities for learning in daily situations and encounters. It was not always planned and anticipated. It was what Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) described as Òperipheral visionÓ learning whereby they were open to the surprises of discovering unexpected insights. They learned from whatever each day brought, through conversations with friends, news events and documentaries, books or newspapers which they chanced to read, and other daily happenings. They lived an attitude of expectancy that allowed them to be surprised and to learn in unanticipated moments.

Recommendations and Summary

The informal learning documented in this study clearly indicates that many older adults live in a continuous learning mode. The degree of intentionality and the openness to unexpected learnings from daily relationships and activities were most notable.

However the opportunities were dependent upon individualsÕ own situations and contexts. Those with less mobility had fewer opportunities for involvement even though some wanted more intellectual stimulation. Similarly their ability to contribute to the broader community was linked to their mobility; those who could go to volunteer sites were excited both by what they were learning and by what they were contributing. More detailed research in the future could further examine learning phenomena and needs related to young-olds and old-olds.

Even though it is now finally recognized that people continue learning into old age, the conception of learning has been limited. Learning is not limited to classrooms; it is woven into the fabric of daily lives and connections. Through learning we grow and mature, becoming more integrated. Learning contributes to a sense of identity and well-being. Future investigation could continue to unravel the links of learning and development.

These people reported that programs for senior learners are oversubscribed. There is a need for more offerings and for flexible registration procedures to enable people to register easily. They need to be offered in places close to public transit and with comfortable physical facilities, bright lighting, and good sound. In the cases of people living in retirement homes, more learning events offered within the residences would be welcomed.

As concepts of informal and incidental learning become more widely understood, learning across the lifespan will increasingly be valued as a continuous phenomenon that is not constrained by formal educational contexts. The skill of knowing how to learn

fundamental to elderlearnersÕ well-being has its roots early in their life cycle and continues to play an important role in their later years. For most, learning is a quiet and natural aspect of their lives which sustains and enriches.

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